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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the book "Achilles in Vietnam" (Jonathan Shay) in relation to Homer's "Iliad" and the need for society to accept the consequences of veterans' experiences. Classical allusions to the epic are incorporated into the study and U.S. experience of the Vietnam War. The paper advocates student "ownership" of literature study and permitting students to "humanize" the text by allowing and legitimatizing diverse interpretations. The paper maintains that only by such humanizing attempts can the humanities be made relevant to students' lives. (EH)

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Achilles in Vietnam and the Humanities Classroom

by James A. Walter, Sinclair Community College

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> If we fail to see that we live in the same world that Homer lived in, then we not only misunderstand Homer; we misunderstand ourselves. The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only adding something better to it.
>
> If, as I believe, one of the functions of tradition is to convey a sense of our perennial nature and of the necesssities and values that are the foundations of our life, then it follows that, without a live tradition, we are necessarily the prey of fashion; we have no choice but to emulate in the arts of 'practical men' of commerce and industry whose mode of life is distraction of spirit and whose livelihood is the outdating of fads.
>
> --Wendell Berry, "The Specialization Of Poetry," STANDING BY WORDS

In 1994, Atheneum published without a great deal of fanfare an unusual book entitled ACHILLES IN VIETNAM: COMBAT TRAUMA AND THE UNDOING OF CHARACTER. Its author is an unusual man by the name of Johathan Shay who holds both the M.D. and the Ph. D., who works for the Boston Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic as a psychiartrist, who teaches at Tufts Medical School, who trains staff for the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans, and, finally, who, in his spare time, communicates with his fellow classical scholars on the classics discussion list on the Internet. The book has already been remaindered and, I think, can still be purchased from the Scholar's Bookshelf catalogue. Yet in its brief shelflife, which says more about American bookpublishing practices than it does about the book itself, ACHILLES IN VIETNAM has had an impact on both medicine and education.

The few reviews it received give us some idea of this impact:

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"a fascinating book ... on modern psychiatry and the archetypes of human struggle. And on top of that it says something that is directly meaningful to the way many of us live our lives. Remarkable."
--Robert Olen Bulter, Pulitzer Prize winner

"shows how war can ruin and persist and writes with love and respect for his patients whose full recovery is still uncertain. ACHILLES IN VIETNAM rattles the heart but bestows hope.
--Gloria Emerson, National Book award winner

"Group loyalty and support were vital to individuals in both groups [at Troy and in Vietnam], while the major difference involved grief work and the image of the enemy. ... This is a profoundly human book and a strong, realistic argument against modern warfare."
--Wm. Beatty, in Booklist, April 1, 1994

"Shay is eccentric in the best sense of that word, and his ideas are thought-provoking and frequently insightful."
--W.D. Ehrhart, in Va Q Rev, Autumn, 1994

Well, just how eccentric is Dr. Shay? You'll have to decide for yourself. He tells us that "a number of years ago I was struck by the similarity of their [the Vietnam veterans] war experiences to Homer's account of Achilles in the ILIAD. ... The epic gives center stage to bitter experiences that actually do arise in war; further...Homer has seen things that we in psychiartry and psychology have more or less missed...." (ACHILLES IN VIETNAM xiii. Since all further quotes of Dr. Shay are from this book, only pages numbers will be given.)

Shay realized, being both a medical doctor and a scholar, that his perceptions might not be accepted readily by experts in either world. He knew he had a credibility problem in trying to associate an epic poem nearly 3,000 years old with psychological problems brought on by a war only 40 years old. But then, we have all experienced such a credibility problem in our classroom endeavoring to convince our contemporary students of the relevance of the thoughts produced by long ago dead cultures.

His solution, as explained in his book, was to "present the ILIAD as the tragedy of Achilles. I will not glorify Vietnam combat veterans [he writes] by linking them to a prestigious 'classic' nor attempt to justify study of the ILIAD by making it sexy, exciting, modern, or 'relevant.' ... Homer's poem does not mean whatever I want it to mean." (xx)

So he "brought [the vets' stories] together with the ILIAD not to tame, appropriate, or co-opt them but to promote a deeper understanding of both, increasing the reader's capacity to be disturbed by the ILIAD rather than softening the blows of the veteran's stories." (xxi) His " claim throughout this book is that the ILIAD can be legitimately read as a text concerning the human experience of combat." (97) The point is the text must be true to the experience; they must illuminate each other. And in bringing the two together, Shay found that veterans and nonveterans could also be brought together by means of what is called a "communalizing experience."

Interestingly enough he also found that nothing he found was entirely new (xxii)--which is quite the same idea, I believe, we want our students to see as they compare their worlds with the worlds of others. Experience verifies the text and the text, in turn, validates the experience. This relationship between the text and real experience, as we all know, is the key to "owning" one's learning.

The main medical point of ACHILLES IN VIETNAM is to prove the need for disturbed veterans to be able to have their terrible and terrifying experiences accepted by the society in which they now live--a society which has not always been able to accept the

consequences of the veterans' experiences in fighting a war we, by and large, do not want to acknowledge. Shay tells us that "healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma--being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community." (4) My very lay definition of "communalization" is that it means to take a unique or private experience and have it accepted (or legitimatized) by the larger public. The public's response is not to condemn nor to praise, necesarily, the private act, but to hear it and to say that that act was indeed a very human act. "Homer helps us to hear what many veterans have been trying desperately to tell us about going berserk" (98-99). Shay's book stresses the importance of community relating to invididual through a work of art--which is indeed the work of humananities education.

Vietnam is compared and contrasted with the ILIAD, in discussing such areas as how war destroys the trustworthy social order of the mind, the grief at the death of a special comrade, communalization of grief, the soldier's rage and going berserk, honoring and dishonoring the enemy, deprivation of honor, suffering by civilians, luck and destiny, the Greek gods and the powers that be. By means of this book, Shay convinces us that "Homer is an acute observer of the psychology of soldiers. Our appreciation is greatly enhanced when we come to the text with a knowledge of that psychology" (81).

Our dominant culture, however, does not always make it easy for us to incorporate classical ideas without a great deal of tension. Shay explains this in his discussions about our concept

of the enemy and our understanding of the Greek gods. He points out that many times the tensions in our culture are due to the contrasts between the Bible and Greek thought:

> Debased images of the enemy are very old in our culture, dating from the Bible.
> By contrast, the ILIAD emphatically portrays the enemy as worthy of respect, even honor. (103).

And:

> As products of a biblical culture, most veterans believed it is nobler to strive to be like God than to want to be human. However, all of our virtues come from NOT being gods: Generosity is meaningless to a god...; courage is meaningless to a god.... Our virtues and our dignity arise from our mortality, our humanity--and not from any success in being God [or god-like]. (85-86)

(The whole point of humanism, afterall, is not to be like the gods.)

Since we tend to see our own civilization as being advanced, we tend to think lightly of Homer's, particularly his emphasis on the gods. However, Shay believes that if we see Homer's gods all together as a metaphor for terrifying social power, as symbols of institutions that acquire tremendous power, such as armies and the social institution of war itself, we can then take Homer's world more seriously (150):

> Like Homeric gods, power-holders in armies can create situations that destroy good character and drive mortals mad. Homer presents the gods simply as power, whether behaving well or badly. For humans the most dangerous power--and at the same time the power most able to confer heart-swelling beneficence--has always been other human beings acting together as a social institution. (153)

> Homer shows the tragic corrosion of a noble character, the transformation of something good into something vile and evil. The gods can do this; the gods have this power; the gods can drown a human in catastrophic moral luck. (154)

> A whole terrritory of meaning for Homer's text springs into view when we read his gods as metaphors for bad military and political leadership. We do not see these traits in the

> ILIAD's human leaders, I presume because they were personally at risk on the battlefield. (154)
>
> In Vietnam men died from the distraction of higher officers in control of fire support, of helicopter extraction, of resupply, of backup companies for reconnaissance patrols. (160)

In other words, these men suffered just as the Greeks suffer from the gods' inconsistency, unreliability, inattentiveness, and distractibity.

But the Greeks, as Shay points out, had

> a distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration that was undertaken as a whole community. We know it as Athenian theater. ...the distinctive character of Athenian theater came from the requirements of a democratic polity made up entirely of present or former soldiers to provide communalization for combat veterans. ...The Athenians communally reintegrated their returning warriors in recurring participation in rituals of the theater. ...The soldier returning to a democracy must find some way to restore <u>themis</u> [a sense of commonly accepted moral principles]. The combat soldier who has been through betrayal, grief, guilt, and rage comes home a Fury. I have speculated that the Athenian theater was the community's principal means of his reception and reintegration into the social sphere as Citizen. (230)

Shay believes that what is missing to a large degree in our culture is a therapy undertaken by the whole community. He believes, however, that such a therapy is available in our culture: the therapy of story telling or what we call narrative. Shay uses much of his book to explain "how narrative heals personality changes, how narrative enables the survivor to rebuild the ruins of character:

> Narrative heals personality changes only if the survivor finds or creates a trustworthy community of listeners for it. Several traits are required for the audience to be trustworthy.
>
> Some traits relate to strength. The listeners must be strong enough to hear the story without injury. ...
>
> The listeners must also be strong enough to hear the story without having to deny the reality of the experience or to blame the victim. ...
>
> To be trustworthy, a listener must be ready to

> experience some of the terror, grief, and rage that the victim did. This is one meaning, after all, of the word compassion. ... Without emotion in the listener there is no communalizatin of the trauma.
>
> To achieve trust, listeners must respect the narrator. ...
>
> Respect also means refraining from judgment. ...
>
> Trauma narrative imparts knowledge to the community that listens and responds to it emotionally. ... The aloneness [of the victim] is broken....
>
> Major recovery, however, requires that personal narrative be particular, not general. The friends who died in Vietnam were not friends in general but particular human beings. ...
>
> All who hear should understand that no person's suffering can be measured against any other person's suffering. ...
>
> Narrative can transform involuntary reexperiencing of traumatic events into memory of the events, thereby reestablishing authority over memory....The task is to remember rather than relive and reenact--and to grieve. ...
>
> We must all strive to be a trustworthy audience for victims of abuse of power. I like to think that Aristotle had something like this in mind when he made tragedy the centerpiece of education for citizens in a democracy. ...
>
> Trauma narratives show us that our own good character is vulnerable to destruction by bad moral luck. ...
>
> Trauma narrative confronts the normal adult with the fragility of the body. These stories bring mortality into view. ...
>
> We need a modern equivalent of Athenian tragedy. Tragedy brings us to cherish our mortality, to savor and embrace it. Tragedy inclines us to prefer attachment to fragile mortals whom we love...and to refuse promised immortality. (188-194)

The theater in Athens was for all citizens and therefore, for all intends and purposes, was a communal experience. However, we realize that as far as the total population, citizenship was a minority of all the people. If we are to have a communal experience that would be truly communal and reach all our citizens, we would need an institution much vaster than that of the theater in Athens. Other than those of the mass media (such as television and movies) which seem to have only the broadest and therefore the lowest sense of community and reflectiveness inherent in them (due to the vast diversity of motivations and

interests in both the maker and the receiver), perhaps the only institution available to us is the all-pervasive school. It is the classroom that comes closest for us to the theater in Athens. And it is the teacher in the classroom who becomes the playwright.

As we all know but want someone else to state, the teacher is the expert (Lola Brown, "Rendering Literature Accessible," in READERS, TEXTS, TEACHERS, ed. Bill Corcoran and Emrys Evans. 93-118). The system and the students credit the teacher with the "correct knowledge and opinion" about the subject at hand. Before one can learn the text--or even in place of learning the text--the students learn the teacher--to read the teacher, as the authority in front of--blocking--the text.

The teacher controls the class: 1) what is to be read and 2) the structure and sequence of things taught and learned. Thus, ideally, it is the teacher who can most successfully establish the necessary communal experience that Shay talks about. It is the teacher who enables the students to own the material under discussion--by making the text relevant (a terrrible and a bad word, I know) to the students, or, in other words, by getting the students to see in what way their experiences or possible expereinces may be like those present in the text. For it is the individual student's--as well as the collective class's--experience of the text, instead of the teacher's, which should be at the core of the classroom study of the text. Students must be enabled to profit from their encounter with the text in the classroom.

Yet often the classroom experience is in itself antagonistic

to student "ownership" because of the role the teacher assumes in front of the class: the role of expert and dispenser of information--might I say, of "holy" information. Instead of being the expert, the teacher needs to try to find ways to move beyond the confines of the classroom in sharing responses to the text.

As teachers we need to realize that whatever guides our choices in the texts we require classes to read as one, they are generally and most likely our connections and not the students. Students are left to "guess" why we choose these works. We must pull out of being at the center of the stage or battlefield and validate students' connections.

The teacher has to accept and legitimatize diverse interpretations. In order to foster students' acceptance of cultural diversity, the teacher has to accept the diversity within the class and provide for different forms of response. "Primary or elementary teachers, on the whole, don't talk of their classroom experiences in whole-class terms.... They are trained to track the progress of each individual" (Lola Brown, "Rendering Literature Accessible," in READERS, TEXTS, TEACHERS, ed Bill Corcoran and Emrys Evans, p 110). We need to learn to do that.

As we all know, even the Administration gets in the way:

> The dominant ideological position handed down [by the administration] tends to lock 'the work' in the classroom, an object on the desk rather than an active part of the students' lives. (Leslie Stratta and John Dixon, "Writing and Literature: Monitoring and Examining," in READERS, p 182)

Though it is heresy for me to say so, the movement to capitalize on distance learning threatens to destroy whatever sense of

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community students have with and within the school, thus destroying what we are trying to do: humanize the humanities.

But to get back to our roles as teachers. Sometimes we are too busy dispensing information to listen to our students. According to Shay, "all too often...our mode of listening deteriorates into intellectual sorting..." (4). This is caused by "bitting" as explained in Richardson's book CRITICAL THINKING IN THE OPEN ACCESS COLLEGE and is at the heart of the problem of our dispensing holy writ which has resulted in the chronologically-based curriculum often used in teaching the humanities. Shay tells us that this kind of listening destroys the trust necessary for establishing communalization (4).

Of course, we all recognize that it is easier to dispense information than to ask students about what we have assigned them to read because they have not read the material well. A real problem is how to get unsophisticated students even to read the material, considering the poetic form of most translations of the ILIAD. Perhaps one can read it aloud to them in class, gradually increasing the amount they read out of class. Yet, taking more time to read together and discuss means doing fewer works. We have to come to some conclusion as to what is more important: covering the holy writ or providing experiences by which students can make use of the works of art we are teaching them.

The subject of Shay's book, PTSD, is worthy of discussion in its own right, but the intent of this paper is to present and to investigate Shay's methods of using a classic text to understand a living problem. We must always keep in mind that while we may hold doctorates, we are not doctors. There can be a danger here

in working too closely with a severe problem. We are teachers, not healers.

To use Shay's methodolgy in the classroom, we need to follow these three steps:

I. Present a problem

--one perceived by students to be experienced by or experience-able to students

II. Understand the people with the problem

--use narrative

--in Shay's case the veterans: their own accounts,
Tim O'Brien, THE THINGS THEY CARRIED
the ILIAD

III. Open up to collateral issues arising from the class and from the texts.

In using this methodology we must always keep in mind the following points: 1) "...narrative enables the survivor to rebuild the ruins of character" (180), 2) there is a need to establish communalization, a community of listeners, and 3) the point of humanities education is the creation of such communities. As Shay says:

> With what kind of human beings do we want to surround ourselves for our own flourishing? If we want to live among equals with strength and candor, among people with, as Euripides says, 'free and generous eyes,' the understanding of trauma can form a solid basis for a science of human rights. There is, of course, no scientific basis for preferring to be surrounded by free equals rather than by cowering slaves. When Lincoln wrote, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master," he did not claim any rational compulsion for what he would not be. This vision of a good life for a human being is an ethical choice and cannot be coerced. It can only be called forth by persuasion, education, and welcoming appeal. (209)

As Athens had its theater, we can use the humanities classroom to establish experiences of communalization. Our society has shut down or blocked off communalization

experiences. In much the same way and with much the same effect, the desiging of the humanities curriculum to emphasize the acquisition of content (known as bitting) often done through chronological presentations has shut down or blocked off the students' "owning' their learning. The humanities--by the fact of their being the humanities--should emphasize the communalization experience.

As Athanasios Moulakis states in his recent book BEYOND UTILITY: LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE: "We can hire someone to teach us which fork to use and how to dance the quadrille, but politeness is something one has to internalize for oneself." (111)

We have to help students both internalize and externalize their values and the values of the diverse cultures in which they find themselves: that is, to see the supportive relationships between the private and the public, the individual and the community. A Ms Saunders informed the classics discussion group on the Internet last spring that she had just taught a course entitled "Modern Issues - Ancient Times." Topics and texts she used included: War - "The Trojan Women"; Feminism - "Lysistrata"; Justice - "Antigone"; Pornography - classical statues (and, I might add, a whole lot of dinnerware); Aging - "On Old Age" by Cicero; and Education - "The Training of an Orator" be Quintilian. As we can see, although I think this particular course was meant for upperclass students, it is not too difficult to come up with topics or problems of meaning for our students and classical texts as well as modern texts to discuss which will engage students in connecting their own life

experiences to the material and thus create the communalization experience so at the heart of the humanities and the teaching of the humanities.

The point is the humanities has real uses and usefulness, not just Kultural uses. The humanities can impact on our lives in specific ways, not just generalized ways, such as making us better educated or more interesting at cocktail parties. As Professor Moulakis states:

> We do not read great texts in order to find conveniently formulated precepts about how to live and what to live for. Rather we make something out of ourselves, we learn to become articulate, aware of the intricacies of the human predicament as our own predicament, by listening to the voices of the past in a mode of conversational understanding, not of prescriptive acceptance or rejection. (57)

By using classic works of art to help the public understand the specific nature of social problems that not only cause alienation in society, but can also ruin public and private character, we can promote a public attitude of caring about the conditions that create such problems, an attitude, in Shay's words, "that will support measures to prevent as much psychological injury as possible. It is [, he says, my] duty as a physician to do my best to heal, but I have an even greater duty to prevent." (xiii - xiv) While we as teachers of the humanities are not professionally capable of healing, we are professionally capable of working to prevent, of making the public care.

Shay has a section towards the end of his book entitled "War Is Not an Industrial Process" in which he points out the harm done to soldiers by picturing "the enemy as inanimate matter to be ground down by attrition." He quotes von Clausewitz to the effect that the enemy is an animate object that reacts and if one

doesn't consider that fact one may be led from one mistake to another. He then states that the Vietnam War was directed by sophisticated "managerial" scientists of the 1960s who talked about the war in terms of "models for the production of warfare," "profit maximization," and "economic models of attrition and crossover" (that is, "when the enemy's rate of losses exceeded the rate of replacement, so that the enemy could no longer 'afford' to continue the war"). Soldiers in the field grew "to believe that all that mattered to military commanders was that things looked good on paper, because it was the numbers on paper that the officers managed...They also saw that their superior officers did not taste the hazards of war." (205)

I sometimes see us teachers of the humanities as soldiers in the field who must put up with administrative commanders who state that the goal of our institutions is to serve more students at less cost, and I know these administrators do not taste the hazards of the classroom. I sometimes see my students as soldiers in the field who think their teachers also do not taste the hazards of risking education.

War is not an industrial process, and neither is education.